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Military Service in the 1980s:
Perspectives on the All-Volunteer Force

by

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Transition

On 30 June 1973, Dwight Elliot Stone assumed an important, if little recognized, role in American history. He was the last U.S. citizen to be drafted. Since then, the Armed Services have been manned with volunteers. Based on the experiences of the last nine years, the Department of Defense is convinced that this is both the right way and the best way to man America's peacetime professional military.

Debate regarding what type of standing military the United States should have is not a new phenomenon. Its genesis is rooted in our colonial experience and constitution. The first major initiative to move away from a small volunteer armed force came as a result of experience in World War II and with it the realization of America's world leadership role. It is important to remember that from an historical perspective our reliance on conscription was an exception, not the rule, as a personnel procurement policy.

In March 1969, President Richard M. Nixon appointed a distinguished commission under Thomas S. Gates, former Secretary of Defense, to "develop a comprehensive plan for eliminating conscription and moving toward a volunteer force". The commission identified problems associated with the draft-dominated military manpower system that was being openly challenged by significant portions of our society, and they structured concrete proposals to be considered as alternatives to it. These proposals to meet the bonafide manpower requirements became the blueprint for a voluntary military.

What many may not know is that DoD appointed its own review force in April 1969 to "develop a program to meet future quantitative and qualitative manpower requirements to the greatest extent possible, without reliance on the draft". The DoD group provided a working dialogue with the Gates Commission, but a DoD report was not officially released to avoid the appearance of competition.

However, there was consensus in both groups as to the feasibility of the all-volunteer force (AVF) and the principal steps needed to end reliance on the draft. These included: (1) substantial pay increases for junior enlisted personnel, (2) selective pay incentives for specialists, (3) additional ROTC scholarships, (4) greatly expanded recruiting programs, (5) need to retain members of the career force, (6) preserve strength of reserve forces, and (7) special emphasis required for physician and dentist recruiting/retention programs.

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On 23 April 1970, the President announced in favor of the AVF, and DoD moved from planning to action. Nevertheless, it took almost three years before AVF implementation -- a period marked by great uncertainty. During this period, there were also several decisions to promote fiscal constraint made by the Nixon Administration that undermined the expansion programs necessary to underwrite the volunteer concept. This was viewed by many manpower analysts and AVF critics as evidence that the Administration lacked real commitment to its own program.

Thus, while the transition, was uneven, by July 1973 we had moved to the AVF, and Dwight Elliot Stone was the last conscript in the United States. There was little doubt at that time that the decision reflected a broad national consensus against conscription. Even so, the great AVF debate started almost immediately.

Status of the All-Volunteer Force

To sustain an AVF is probably the most complex and demanding task that the Department of Defense (DoD) will face over the next decade, especially as the result of our conscious decision to increase the size of our military by approximately 200,000 servicemembers. From a policy point of view, the most important military manpower questions for the 1980s include, "Are we recruiting and retaining enough high-quality people to meet our national security requirements, and what steps must we take to ensure that we will be able to do so throughout the 1980s?"

End-Strength -- In every year of its existence, the AVF has either achieved the Congressionally authorized end-strength, or been no more than 1.5 percent short. It is true that during the post-Vietnam era, end-strengths were gradually reduced because of budgetary shortages Congressional restrictions, and changes in force structure. Nevertheless, maintaining our numerical objectives so well without any resort to conscription was no small achievement. This is the only time in our nation's history that we have built a large peace-time standing force exclusively with volunteers.

Recruiting -- Fiscal year (FY) 1979 was the first year in which AVF recruiting did not meet planned objectives; in fact, it was seven percent short. However, because fewer people left the military that year than were expected, overall end-strength was only slightly below authorization. There is no doubt, however, that FY 1979 was the worst recruiting year in the history of the AVF.

Fortunately, the picture has brightened. In FY 1980, the Services not only met their recruiting goals but were able to make up for the previous year's shortages. This success was attributable largely to three factors: relatively high unemployment rates, particularly among youth; some recruiting innovations; and the Army's willingness to accept large numbers of high school dropouts and people who scored comparatively low on the enlistment test. As for FYs 1981 and 1982, numerical objectives were satisfied with significant improvements in the educational levels and aptitude test scores of new recruits.

This later point leads usefully away from recruit quantity to quality. The issue of quality has become one of the thorniest and most argued in the entire debate about the AVF. "Quality" is generally used by manpower analysts to describe those characteristics and attributes of military personnel that contribute to a productive, effective, and motivated force. Although many research efforts have been conducted and are underway to define and refine measures of "quality," the current operational definition of the quality of enlistees consists of two measures: educational attainment and enlistment test scores.

The Armed Services place high premium on completion of high school for the enlisted ranks. The possession of a high school diploma is the best single measure of a person's potential for adapting to life in the military. Enlistees who have not completed high school (at time of entry), are about twice as likely as are high school graduates to leave the military before finishing their first term of service. Thus, one practical gauge of military recruiting "success" has been the proportion of high school graduates.

The Military Services attempt, in any given year, to recruit as many high school graduates as possible. In some years they have been more successful than in others. Indeed, in FY 1974 only half of all Army and Marine Corps enlistees were high school graduates. However, by FY 1981 the proportion of recruits with high school diplomas had increased in all Services. In FY 1982, those percentages were the highest ever, including periods of conscription. Never before had the proportion of new recruits in the Army--or the proportion for all Services combined--eclipsed the 80-percent level. In FY 1982, those percentages were 86, 79, 86, 94, and 86 for the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and total DoD, respectively.

As in the case of formal education, the Military Services would prefer to recruit the "most trainable" young men and women from the general population. The test used to screen applicants for enlistment is the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). The ASVAB consists of ten subtests. The scores of four of the subtests (word knowledge, paragraph comprehension, arithmetic reasoning, and numerical operations) are combined to produce an Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) score. The AFQT score, supplemented by scores on various composites of aptitude subtests, is used in conjunction with educational, medical, and moral standards to determine an applicant's enlistment eligibility. The Services prefer to enlist individuals with high AFQT scores because those recruits can be trained more quickly and are more likely to qualify for specialized training in more occupational areas.

For reporting purposes, scores on the AFQT traditionally have been grouped into five broad categories. Persons who score in Categories I and II are above average in trainability; those in Category III, average; those in Category IV, below average; and those in Category V, markedly below average and, under current Service policy, not eligible to enlist.

A recent error in calibrating the AFQT produced higher scores for many individuals than they should have been given. As a result, the Services accepted large numbers of people who would not have been

eligible to enlist had their scores been calibrated properly. Particularly at the lower end of the scale, the error had significant consequences. Whereas we originally believed that six percent of all DoD recruits in FY 1980 were in Category IV, after correcting for the calibration error, 31 percent of all DoD recruits that year were Category IV. For the Army, 50 percent of its FY 1980 accessions scored in the below average range. The calibration problem was corrected in October 1980 with the introduction of a new ASVAB.

Increased attractiveness of military service, brought about by recent initiatives, such as the 1980 and 1981 pay packages (compensation and bonuses), innovative recruiting strategies, a test program of enhanced educational benefits, and the economy resulted in significant improvements in the AFQT scores on new recruits. The proportion of non-prior service accessions scoring in Category IV declined to 18 percent for total DoD in FY 1981 and to 13 percent in FY 1982. For the Army, the FY 1981 rate was 31 percent; that percentage dropped to 19 percent in FY 1982.

Retention -- The heart and soul of any military organization is the career force. The composition of the career force is almost completely independent of the way in which people are brought into the military for their first term. If serious problems in retaining careerists should occur, they would not be solved by a draft.

Today's area of concern is the mid-career force--those with more than 10 years of service--especially in certain critical job skills. Low first-term reenlistment rates during Vietnam coupled with declining second and third reenlistment rates since the mid-1970s have produced a force dangerously short of midcareer, senior enlisted personnel. Career reenlistment rates dropped from 80 percent in 1974 to 68 percent in 1979.

The reasons for this sharp decline are not obscure--pay scales increasingly less competitive with the private sector (in stark contrast to the explicit assumptions behind the AVF) and a general deterioration in the living conditions for military personnel and their families. Military pay kept pace with the civilian sector only for the first two years of the AVF. Pay caps in 1975, 1978, and 1979 yielded military pay in 1980 that was 20 percent below what it was in 1972. The gap between military and civilian pay had widened so much that even the substantial raises of 1980 and 1981 left military pay still behind its 1972 relationship to civilian pay. The end result has been a vicious cycle in which mid-career shortages force those mid-career personnel who stay to work longer hours, serve longer overseas tours of duty, and, in the case of the Navy, have more frequent and longer tours at sea--thus discouraging many of them from reenlisting.

The 1980 and 1981 pay raises and other initiatives have tried to interrupt this cycle, and results are now beginning to be realized. Career reenlistment rates climbed to 82 percent at the end of FY 1982. At the same time, the reenlistment rates among first-termers increased from 30 percent in FY 1976 to 39 percent in FY 1980 and to 55 percent in FY 1982.)

We have also paid more attention to quality of life both here and overseas, and this means, among other things more and better housing, improved medical care, and enhanced recreational facilities. But it will take a long time to repair the cumulative damage of these shortages. You do not produce a seasoned first sergeant overnight, and you cannot pick up 20,000 experienced petty officers in a year. We are moving in the right direction, but we must maintain the momentum.

Representation

Two other issues warrant consideration--women in the military and the representativeness of the force.

In 1972, women constituted 1.5 percent of the Armed Forces; today, 8.5 percent. Dramatic increases in the number of military women are the result of two developments--the women's movement throughout our society and the All-Volunteer Force. This expansion of opportunities for women in the military has been good for women, and it has been good for the military. Ethically, it is right, and pragmatically, if we are to maintain the AVF while the male youth population is shrinking, it is wise.

Our experience so far is that women exhibit the same range of competence as their male counterparts. Military women have proven themselves dedicated, effective, and professional. Yet, the ultimate issue regarding women in the military is indeed the ultimate test of a military force--combat. Thus, a comprehensive and systematic review of the role of women in the Services is underway.

The second issue is how representative the Armed Forces are of American society as a whole. The question is raised in two ways--practical and ethical.

I, for one, reject the "practical" concern based on the notion that servicemembers from certain socioeconomic backgrounds or of some races or from particular regions of the country will be less willing or able than their comrades in arms to defend America or American interests under certain war scenarios. This argument is specious at best, bigoted at worst. Based on experience in past wars and based on what I know firsthand of those in uniform today, I personally see no grounds for concern along these lines.

The ethical concern is, in theory, more well-founded. The burden of defending an entire society should not fall disproportionately on any one group or segment of that society. I say that knowing full well that virtually no army in history has been fully representative of the society it defends.

Numerous surveys and studies of the representativeness of the force have been conducted. The truth belies the popular myth. In terms of socioeconomic status, the very highest and the very lowest brackets are underrepresented in the enlisted force, but otherwise it is quite representative. Geographically, we are getting a proportionate share of recruits from all regions and all states. Our most recent major study compared 18-23 year-old military personnel with

their contemporaries in the civilian workforce. The findings will be surprising to many: (1) the percentage of high school graduates is greater, (2) the educational and occupational distributions of their parents are virtually the same, (3) their marital status distribution is the same, (4) their health profiles reveal no differences, and (5) their mental abilities are somewhat higher.

In terms of race, the minority composition of the Armed Forces began to grow during the Vietnam War, and it has increased more rapidly under the AVF. It is important to note two facts. First, since 1973, all recruits were volunteers, not draftees; and, second, higher percentages of black youth meet the standards for enlistment now than before. Improved educational opportunities for blacks have, I believe, yielded higher aptitude scores for blacks. During this same period, however, unemployment rates for black youth have become high. In my opinion, the military offers blacks and other minorities better opportunities for training and advancement than does much of the civilian sector. It is no surprise, therefore, that large numbers of blacks are joining and making a career of the Services.

At the same time, the equity issue persists--no group should have to bear a disproportionate share of the burden of defending, or, in the event of war, a disproportionate share of the casualties. I do not believe we are at the former stage yet, nor do I foresee it in the future. As for the latter, a major war would in all likelihood stimulate a draft, and racial balance among military personnel, including casualties, would be quickly restored.

Future Forecast For The AVF

I have spoken about the past and present of the AVF. In that regard, we need to recognize both its successes and problems. A la Mark Twain, the rumors of the death (or even the terminal illness) of the AVF are premature. Thus, we in DoD are convinced that the AVF is a success; however, we cannot become complacent. The recent military pay raises were essential. Educational incentives must be enhanced. Quality of life must be improved and maintained. The Reserves, in particular, must be strengthened.

Last year, the President appointed a Military Manpower Task Force, chaired by Secretary Caspar Weinberger. The Task Force has worked hard reviewing the adequacy of military compensation and incentives; educational benefits; current manpower readiness; effectiveness of training, leadership, and discipline; enlistment standards; recruiting and retention efforts; and Selective Service registration. Its findings were released in a press conference on 18 October 1982, and the report will be available shortly.

Finally, another key element important to the success of the volunteer force is the attitude of the public toward our servicemembers. Over the past several years, the American people has become more supportive of our young men and women in uniform. That positive shift in attitude, if sustained, combined with management initiatives and appropriate compensation levels should preserve the viability of the AVF.